Presbyterian Large Church Conference

Orlando, FL

Presentation #3

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH CHARLIE?

How to be Faithful in a Pluralistic Culture

John M. Buchanan

January, 2007

When President George W. Bush and Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met at the president's Texas ranch, among the topics they discussed was prayer. "Abdullah told [the president] that he relies on God when he makes tough decisions, and the president said he prays a lot to God to guide him as well" (Maureen Dowd, *New York Times,* 1 May 2002).

Which raises the eternal question of the relationship between religions that make exclusive truth claims. The crown prince is a Muslim. The president is a Christian. Is ours right and all the others wrong? Is ours more true than others? Or are all religions ultimately equal, each striving in its own way, with its own history and culturally influenced

symbols and institutions, to know the unknowable? Is our God the only God, our way the only way, all the others counterfeit? Some think so. It wasn't all that long ago, after all, that the head of the Southern Baptist Convention announced confidently that God doesn't even hear the prayers of non-Christians.

Martin Marty recently offered a helpful reminder that Allah is simply the Arabic word for God.

> **The Book of Genesis in the Arabic Bible begins, "In the beginning Allah created." . . . The Old and New Testaments in Arabic are replete with the word; whether orthodox, Coptic, Evangelical, or Reformed Christian, they worship Allah. (From a letter to the editor of *World* by Helen Louise Hendon, quoted in *Context* January 2002)**
>
> **Arabic Christians worship Allah.**

So the issue is, when a Muslim and a Jew and a Christian, each speaking Arabic, pray to Allah, who is listening? What exactly is happening? Are there three deities? Is there one God who hears all three prayers, or one God who chooses one prayer and hits the delete button for the other two?

For me, Charles Feldstein defines the problem. Mr. Feldstein is a successful businessman whose fund raising firm has worked with some of Chicago's most distinguished institutions. He attended the University of Chicago Divinity School briefly and considered becoming a Rabbi. He's in his seventies now, a member of a local synagogue, his wife is an invalid, he's a neighbor and a most active, intentional and committed member of the community of faith that lives its life at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. He and I have talked about this—logistically, pastorally and theologically. He told me he was walking in our courtyard one day enjoying the green grass and some sculpture we were exhibiting. The windows were open and the organist was playing *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.* Charlie's a smart guy and knew that the words were written by a famous anti-Semite.

But it was beautiful, he said, and so he decided to come back in the morning for worship—on Reformation Sunday, which he did and which he has been doing weekly ever since—ten years now. He attends Adult Education classes, organizes and leads a Passover Seder for us, occasionally teaches, and one

of the unforgettable sights the ministers are privileged to see is Charlie, in his pew on Christmas Eve, his face illuminated by candlelight in a sea of faces, singing his heart out, "Joy to the World, the Lord has come."

We had a Christological conversation once. "What do you think about him? Charlie," I asked. "You know, Jesus." "I like him a lot," Charlie said. "He was a Jew—a good one.

I suppose I think about him a lot like those other Jews—Peter, Andrew, James. They didn't know what to make of him either but they liked him enough to want to be around him. I'm like them. And besides, my Christology (he attended Divinity School long enough to have picked up the vocabulary) is as well developed as a lot of people I see sitting around me on Sunday morning, I'll bet."

One time I preached a sermon, "Do You Have to Go to Church to be a Christian?" Charlie wrote me a note and said the more interesting question was "Do You Have to be a Christian to go to Church?"

The first real problem the early Christian Church, which was thoroughly Jewish, had was—what to do with "God fearing gentiles" who were hanging around. Our dilemma is the opposite: what to do with a Jesus-intoxicated Jew!

The question is no longer purely academic. Two new realities have put us in a new place. The first is the unprecedented religious diversity of our own culture. The world was always religiously diverse, and in that wonderful diversity, the United States for two centuries reflected Western Christianity or at least something called the Judeo-Christian tradition. But with the impetus of a new immigration policy and globalization, we have become a genuinely religiously pluralistic culture, the most pluralistic in the world. There is no place quite like us. Harvard's Diana Eck begins her book, *A New Religious America*, with a startling description:

> **The huge white dome of a mosque, with its minarets, rises from the cornfields just outside Toledo, Ohio. . . . A great Hindu temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville. A Cambodian Buddhist**

> **temple and monastery is set in the farmlands southeast of Minneapolis.**

Exact numbers are difficult to establish, but Eck says that:

> **There are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians, more Muslims than members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and as many Muslims as there are Jews. . . . . Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist city in the world, with a Buddhist population spanning the whole range of the Asian Buddhist world from Sri Lanka to Korea, along with a multitude of native-born American Buddhists. (pp. 1-3)**

The second new reality, of course, is what happened to us on September 11. There was more than religion at the heart of the Al Quaeda zealots who committed suicide while taking the lives of some 3000 Americans, but a form of radical Islam provided the theological/philosophical context and ultimately the rationale for what they did. And almost immediately two popular spokespersons for the radical Christian Right in this country announced that

God had allowed the attack to punish America for feminism, homosexuality, and abortion rights.

"Dear God, save us from the people who believe in you," someone scribbled on a wall in Washington in the days following September 11. Maureen Dowd wrote in the New York Times:

> **Forgive me, but something is badly awry. I was taught that religion should invocate sympathy, patience, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, a love of peace. Instead, the name of God is used to justify vices that are the opposite of these virtues.**

We are in a new time and place, and there is no more critical issue before us than this one: the relationship of our faith/our religion to the faith and religion of others different from us, but with whom we must share a country, a culture, a world grown smaller and more dangerous than ever before.

In or about 55 A.D., a Christian missionary who also happened to be a sophisticated thinker arrived in Athens. His name was Paul. Athens at the time was several centuries past its days as the center of the

Western world. Socrates had died 450 years earlier. The political focus had shifted west to Rome. Commerce was spread among other Greek cities. What Athens still excelled at, however, was philosophy. There were two famous schools of philosophy, the Epicureans and the Stoics. There was a university in Athens, and in the center of the city at a place called the Areopagus, an outcrop of rocks, the philosophers gathered every day to debate. You can still visit it, climb on the rocks, and imagine the lively conversation going on all around you. The marketplace is not far away, and I can imagine the people of Athens browsing through the busy market stalls and stopping by the Areopagus to listen in for a moment.

When he came to Athens and spoke first in the local synagogues, Paul was brought to the Areopagus to make his case. What follows is fascinating. It is, someone noted, a brilliant piece of classic rhetoric. Paul accommodates to his listeners, acknowledges their interest in religion and theology, even acknowledges seeing many altars in the city, surely a sign of profound spirituality. He even names one of them: the altar to the unknown God. Paul knows enough Greek philosophy to use it in his argument,

referring to God as the one "in whom we live and move and have our being," a phrase he borrowed from a sixth-century B.C. philosopher by the name of Epimenides of Crete. "We too are his offspring," he says, taking a phrase from Aratus of Soli, who three centuries earlier said that very thing about Zeus: "We are his offspring." (See *Texts for Preaching, Year C.*)

Paul makes two important points, and the way he does conveys his own deep respect for the views of the Greeks, whom some would have called pagan. They have a big theology, a big God concept. Even though they have a lot of idols, the one dedicated to the unknown god shows that they know that God can never be limited by something human beings construct. That puts them on common ground with a basic premise of Judaism and Christianity, namely that there can be no idols because an idol limits God and God, in what Jürgen Moltmann calls God's God-ness, cannot be limited—not by an idol made of wood or stone, not by a temple, not by a creed, not by a theology, not by a church.

The first consequence of belief in one God is theological modesty. It is to know that no one has all the truth. It is to acknowledge that we put our

ultimate trust in God, not things people have said about God.

At our best we try to remind ourselves that the theological enterprise, whether it is in the classroom, your pulpit, or in bed at night when you address God in your prayers at the end of the day — the theological enterprise ought always to begin with what my mentor Joseph Sittler used to call theological modesty — a profound and authentic modesty before the mystery of God. Sittler and others taught that when God is no longer a mystery, when God is altogether known and understood — God is no longer God. It was Augustine who said that "if you understand — it isn't God." Luther talked about the "hidden God" and Paul Tillich — "the God beyond theism." And of course, Moses wants to see God and God hides him in the cleft of a rock, giving Moses a look at the backside of God. What a great and important image that is — mindstretching, discomforting and altogether healthy. And what a bracing correction to the absolute certainty of fundamentalism of every kind and also the popular preachers who present a God who is simple, manageable and altogether knowable.

Jürgan Moltmann wrote recently — "God is not just a God of believers. He is the Creator of heaven and earth, and so he is not particularist in the way that human belief in God: he is as universal as the sun which rises on the evil and the good, and the rain that falls upon the just and the unjust."

The first consequence of belief in our God is theological modesty.

And the second consequence is openness to the truth other people and other religions know. Presbyterian theologian the late Shirley Guthrie says that when Christians hear Jesus say "I am the way, truth and the life: no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6), they take that to mean that because Jesus is the only way to salvation, Christianity is the only true religion. And that has led, far too frequently, to exclusivism, arrogance, and intolerance.

Guthrie suggested that we ask who is this Jesus who says "I am the way." He is the one who also says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to the fold. I must bring them also. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). Who is this Jesus who says "I am the way"? He is the "friend of sinful, unbelieving,

or different-believing people who were excluded and rejected by law-abiding, morally respectable, members of the religious establishment." Who is this Jesus who says "I am the way"? He is the one who "believed that caring for the needy, suffering human beings is more important than conformity to the requirements of moral and theological orthodoxy" ("The Way, the Truth, and the Life," *The Presbyterian Outlook,* 11 February 2002).

Christianity is our religion, our theological and, in many ways, our cultural home. But this is bigger than Christianity. This is about a God who creates all people and to whom all people are related and in whom all people live and move and have being. This Jesus is the one who died for all people and whose resurrection means that he is alive and working—certainly in and through the Christian church, which is his body, but also in ways that are bigger than that even.

Shirley Guthrie: "If we believe in a risen and living Christ who has been and is at work in the world outside our Christian circle, we will know that we do not have to 'take' Christ to people of other religious traditions: we go to *meet* him in our encounters with

them. We will expect and gladly welcome evidence that the grace and truth we have come to know in him has reached into their lives too. We will be glad to hear them saying things about their God and their faith that sound remarkably similar to what we say about our God and our faith. The truth we seek in inter-religious dialogue is not our truth but *God's* truth."

And so, Professor Guthrie argues, we are not only permitted to enter respectful dialogue with people of other faiths but obligated to listen with respect and to learn the truth they know. And in our evangelism, we are not to argue the superiority of our religion and the exclusivism of our truth but to share what we have come to believe and trust and to receive the same from the other.

Does it mean that all religions are equal? Of course not. Some religions are toxic. The use of religion to inspire and motivate suicide bombers is evil. But so was the wanton slaughter of Muslim people by Christian Crusaders. Christina Callsion, a Presbyterian missionary with impeccable evangelical credentials who works with Kurdish people in Berlin, says that because of the "political baggage the word

‘Christian’ has for Middle Eastern Muslims, she doesn’t even use the word. Instead she calls herself a follower of Jesus” (See “Following Jesus to the Mosque,” *Presbyterians Today,* May 2002).

Does it mean that everybody makes it in the end, that no one is lost? Or the reverse, that only the Christians are going to get into heaven, or more commonly, only certain kinds of Christians, the Catholics, the Presbyterians, the elect, the Baptists, the Lutherans, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Born Agains. There seems to be a deep human need to know that we’re going to get there, but they aren’t, or I am but you’re not. And I think we must confess—and this is what I deeply believe—that we don’t know enough to say that. Or that we *do* know enough about the mystery of a God who transcends every human construction, that we do know enough of the God of creation, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, never to place that sort of limitation around God.

Elmhurst professor Ron Goetz was invited to preach at the funeral of the father of two friends of his, a man who was an atheist. He said, on the occasion,

> **I would hope that grace, which God intends for the salvation of all humanity, is not so fragile that it cannot stand up to human unbelief.**

What about people who don't believe? Or people who believe differently? I don't think we know enough to be sure of the mind of God. Professor Goetz said at his unbelieving friend's funeral:

> **Surely, God could never conclude that there is no other choice, given the trouble we make for God, but to damn all but a chosen few to eternal rejection. ("Grace Is Wide Enough," *Christian Century,* 19 October 2000)**

What about the mission? the missionary enterprise? What about the great commission— "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you. And remember: I am with you always, to the end of the age."

"Make disciples — teaching all that I have commanded."

Sometimes we have had difficulty doing both. Barbara Brown Taylor says somewhere that for her Jesus is the way, truth and life for her — and his way teaches respect for other ways.

Sometimes we've been embarrassed by the missionary enterprise. It is intellectually fashionable to blame Christian missionaries for colonialism and the disregard for and ruin of indigenous cultures. The argument is that missionaries were merely forerunners for Western imperialism and business interests — that the Jesuits merely prepared the way for commerce: that the missionaries in the process brought more Western culture than gospel. There are of course, horror stories but there is also another side of the story.

Harvard Professor Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian, an Editor at Large for *The Christian Century* wrote a helpful article for us once that challenges the politically correct bias regarding the missionaries.

Sanneh observes that Christian missionaries translated scripture into 1800 different African languages and dialects and in the process were

helpful in creating written languages for many of them. That process actually enhanced and preserved indigenous culture, he argues. It instilled awareness and pride in indigenous people and instead of submitting meekly to political and cultural oppression actually was the breeding ground for cultural pride, nationalism and the longing for independence that spelled the eventual end of colonialism. The professor scolds Western Christians for their guilt about missionary activity and his is a word we need to hear.

In a book about to be published, *A Multitude of Blessings*, McCormick theological Seminary President Cynthia Campbell thanks New Testament Professor Sara Tanzer, a Jew, for reminding her that witness, proclamation, testimony is an integral part of Christianity and that when we don't do it we are negating the very core of our faith. Witness — telling the story — proclaiming good news — and then turning over to God the matter of making disciples.

Presbyterian theologian George Hunsinger calls it a "Generous Orthodoxy:" the affirmation and trust that "however salvation happens it finally depends on the gracious act of God."

What is the great commission for our age? It is to go into the world — beginning with our own culture and tell the story of Jesus and his love. It is to go into the world with the amazing story of God's love for the creation. It is not to shout louder, argue more forcefully: it is certainly not to browbeat or coerce. It is to go into the world and tell the story of Jesus in the only way it has ever been authentically told and that is by living it.

One of the unforgettable experiences of my year as Moderator of our General Assembly was a visit to Ocijek, Croatia, just months after the cease-fire. We visited Vukovar, where Serbian forces targeted public buildings, the soul of the community, schools, hospitals, libraries, town halls, for destruction, and retreating forces mined abandoned houses to greet their returning owners. We visited Vinkovsci where Serbians blew up the Roman Catholic Cathedral and Croation Catholics retaliated by blowing up the Orthodox Cathedral. We have a little Reformed Church in Vinkovsci. It was hit by a mortar shell which caused extensive damage. Our One Great Hour of Sharing helped repair and restore the church and manse, and I was there on the Sunday after Easter to represent our church and to preside at the Lord's

Table—an unforgettable experience. We visited the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Ocijek where there is a remarkably diverse student body from Central Europe, North Africa, Russia, and the Ukraine. The President is Peter Kuzmic—who describes himself as a Calvinist Pentecostal. Peter is a recognized missiologist with sound academic credentials. Peter understands not only the great missionary commission but also the uniqueness of his own very diverse culture. Peter told me that in a part of the world that has never forgotten the brutality of the Crusades, the word "crusade"—even "evangelistic crusade," sounds like an assault, a threat. "Balkan Harvest" was the ill-advised name given to an evangelistic initiative concocted by Western evangelicals. "Do you have any idea how offensive that sounds to Croation Catholics, Serbian Orthodox, not to mention Bosnian Muslims?" Peter asks.

Peter pleads for "missiological authenticity," i.e., the genuine love and justice of Jesus, and while we were in Ocijek, we met a man who seemed to express it perfectly.

His name is Antol Bolag, a Serbian businessman who decided to commit his life to Christian mission

and signed on with the Agape Project, a refugee service and resettlement initiative connected to the Evangelical Seminary and funded, in part, by our One Great Hour of Sharing. Antol's job was to bring together the materials and labor and coordinate the rebuilding of Muslim villages destroyed by the Serbians. Antol was working with a Muslim village chief to rebuild the village and resettle its exiled occupants. He noticed that the rebuilding plans did not include the Mosque which had been leveled. He inquired of the village chief: "Why no Mosque?" and the chief said, "You're Christians aren't you? Why would you help us rebuild our house of worship?" And Antol was able to answer, "We will help you rebuild your Mosque <u>because</u> we are followers of Jesus, and he told us to love our neighbors and he told a story about a man who stopped beside the road to help a stranger, whose religion was different, but whose need was very human."

That's authenticity. That's authentic Christian witness in the midst of unexpected and unprecedented religious diversity.

Paul honored the Athenian's search for truth represented by their many idols, and particularly the

altar to the unknown god. There is something honorable about the search itself, something common to all human beings, something holy about the longing for God. Frederick Buechner said, "We do it all our lives—search for God, long for God, in the hodgepodge that is our lives," he said. "Thou hast made our hearts restless until they find their rest in thee," St. Augustine wrote centuries ago. And he was right. We are restless, we long for truth, for certainty, for assurance; we search for God in one way or another all our lives.

And what Christian faith maintains, not so much as an intellectual truth to be quoted and recited as a person to be trusted, is that in Jesus Christ, God has come to the world with mercy and grace and love and forgiveness; that God wants to reconcile the world and is busy doing that in ways that are far beyond our ability to see or understand.

I experienced something of that restoration and reconciliation on an unforgettable occasion in the sanctuary of Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. It was Friday, September 14, 2001, and we were in a community worship service sponsored by Holy Name Cathedral, Chicago Sinai Congregation—our Jewish

neighbors two blocks west on Delaware—and Fourth Presbyterian Church. We were reeling in the aftermath of the events that had happened three days earlier on September 11. It was unlike anything any of us had ever experienced before. It seemed that we were suddenly under attack by people who hated us for being who we are: Americans. People had attacked us, killed thousands of our fellow citizens for no other reason than they happened to be Americans. And they had done it in the name of God. And one could not help but ask, "Whose God? What God?"

The sanctuary was full as it never had been: every seat filled, aisle and narthex crowded with people standing. I delivered a brief homily. Father McLaughlin said a few words. Rabbi Michael Sternfield of Sinai Congregation was to pray, and when he stood up to pray he did the most remarkable thing. He asked us all to pray together, out loud, each in our own voice, our own faith language. He invited the Jews to pray the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, the Kaddish, and he invited the Christians to pray the traditional Lord's Prayer, taught to us by a Palestinian Jew. And we did. And our voices mingled—Hebrew, English and, I am sure, some Arabic. Our prayers wove together and filled a Christian sanctuary

and rose together to the one God of us all, the one God who hears every prayer, the one God who loves each and every one of us and will never, ever give up on any one of us, and whose grace and mercy exceeds anything you and I, or any one else for that matter, could ever think or imagine.